

## Cultural Change for a Bearable Climate (ARI)

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**Theme:** Social, economic and cultural systems will have to evolve so that they can again exist within the boundaries of nature.

**Summary:** Stabilising the climate and curbing ecological decline more broadly will take nothing less than transforming cultural systems so that living sustainably becomes as natural as living as a consumer feels today. To do that, it will be necessary to harness leading societal institutions just as consumer interests did in the past century, when they so effectively normalised consumerism.

### Analysis:

#### *Introduction<sup>1</sup>*

In the past few years, there has been an increasing use of war metaphors when discussing climate change. Between 2006 and 2007 the number of news articles doubled mentioning the war on/against climate change, in 2008, the industrialist Richard Branson co-founded the Carbon War Room to fight climate change, and in the UK there is now even discussion of war-time-esque rationing of carbon.

But will this be enough to ‘mobilise’ society to address climate change? A social media effort produced in 2010 by over two dozen animators –created to energise the ‘troops’ to deal with climate change– raised an essential point: ‘a war on global warming needs to be a war on consumerism’. It is rare that this connection is made so clearly. Of course, the narrator then made it as clear that governments will not fight this war because they are locked into a growth paradigm where their perceived survival depends on a perpetually-growing economy, which of course is centred on consumer spending (either directly or, in the case of export-heavy countries, indirectly).

But making this connection is a first step, and now, perhaps we are ready for the second step: surrendering the war against climate change altogether, and mobilising for an all-out shift away from the consumer culture and proactively engineering a culture of sustainability. In other words, working to shift cultural norms to make living sustainably feel as natural as living as a consumer feels today. Only by intentionally harnessing key societal institutions –namely education, business, the media, government, traditions and social movements– will we be able to transform cultural norms (and the resultant

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<sup>1</sup> For an extended discussion, see ‘The Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures’ and other articles in *State of the World 2010: Transforming Cultures: From Consumerism to Sustainability*.

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economic, social and consumption patterns that stem from them) to the extent needed to stabilise the climate and prevent severe disruptions of human society.

#### *The Unsustainability of Current Consumption Patterns*

Before describing the needed cultural shift away from consumerism, it may be worth investigating why it is necessary in the first place. The evidence demonstrates clearly that current consumption patterns are unsustainable –meaning that they are undermining humanity’s long-term ability to thrive on planet Earth– and will therefore need to be altered if human society is to remain stable and at current (or even larger) population levels. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment found that approximately 60% of ecosystem services, including climate regulation, fresh water provision, fisheries and many other services were either being degraded or used unsustainably. This comprehensive review of scientific research also reminds us that the climate system is just one of the several vital ecosystem services being destabilised by modern society.

What has caused the human species to live so far beyond the means of the planetary systems it depends on? The board of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment has even warned that ‘human activity is putting such strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet’s ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted’. In part it is sheer numbers: the human population has more than doubled to 6.8 billion people since 1965. But as the well-known Ecological Footprint indicator reveals, population alone cannot explain our current crisis.<sup>2</sup> The Earth can sustain a variable number of people without depleting the planet’s total biocapacity, depending on how much we consume. For example, if all lived like those in low-income countries –averaging a per capita equivalent of about US\$1,300 Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) per year–, the world could sustain roughly 13.6 billion people (there are about 13.6 billion global hectares of biocapacity and low-income individuals use 1.0 global hectares per capita). If we all were to live like high-income country residents –earning an average of US\$33,000 PPP per person and using about 6.4 global hectares–, however, the Earth could sustain just 2.1 billion people. While shocking, these numbers should not surprise us, for it is the rich, not the poor, who have large homes and cars, fly, use large amounts of electricity, eat more meat and processed foods, and purchase more goods and services –all of which have a considerable ecological impact–. Indeed, according to a study by the Princeton ecologist Stephen Pacala, the world’s richest 500 million people (roughly 7% of the world’s population) currently emit 50% of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions, while the poorest 3 billion emit only 6%. Of course, higher income patterns do not in all cases equate with increased consumption, but where consumerism is the cultural norm, the odds of consuming more go up when in possession of more income, even in ecologically conscious individuals.

#### *The Spread of Consumerism*

Consumerism, at its simplest, is a cultural paradigm (or orienting pattern) where people find meaning, contentment and acceptance primarily through what they consume. While consumption is a natural part of being human –one must eat, drink and have basic clothing and shelter to survive– the level of consumption is almost completely driven by cultural norms. And, in consumer cultures, that level has continued to increase, stimulated by new products and technologies, and new cultivated desires and needs.

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<sup>2</sup> Global Footprint Network (2008), *The Ecological Footprint Atlas 2008*, revised edition, Oakland, CA, 16/XII/2008).

At this point, consumerism is no longer simply an economic phenomenon but has co-opted many of the elements of cultural systems. Brand logos, jingles and spokescharacters have become dominant symbols. Cultural norms, such as diet, increasingly reflect consumerist influences. Even traditions are increasingly centred on consumerism. Rites of passage like weddings and funerals are celebrated in ways that consume significant resources, and are perceived as abnormal if they do not. For example, the average funeral costs about US\$10,000 in the US, and requires significant financial and ecological resources.

One commonality between all these consumerised elements of culture is their intentional cultivation by dominant institutions. Business, the media, governments and educational institutions have played a central role in orienting cultures on consumerism.

Arguably, the strongest driver of this cultural shift have been business interests. On a diverse set of fronts, businesses found ways to coax more consumption out of people. Credit was liberalised, for instance, with instalment payments and credit cards, driving an 11-fold increase between just 1945 and 1960.<sup>3</sup> Products were designed to have short lives or quickly go out of style (strategies called, respectively, physical and psychological obsolescence). And workers were encouraged to take pay raises rather than increased time off, increasing their disposable incomes.

But perhaps the biggest business tool for stoking consumer cultures is marketing. Global advertising is now a US\$643 billion industry. In the US, the average 'consumer' sees or hears hundreds of advertisements every day, and, from an early age, learns to associate products with positive imagery and messages. Plus, there are billions more spent on subtler, more manipulative forms of marketing, like product placement (US\$3.5 billion annually).

Businesses, even as they pursue very limited agendas of expanding sales for their products, play a significant role in stimulating consumerism. And whether intentionally or not, they transform cultural norms in the process. Car companies, for example, have played an aggressive role in shifting cultures to be car-centric. In the US, even in the 1920s, car companies already lobbied for increased road support, supported organisations that fought against regulating car usage, even bought up several public trolley systems and dismantled them. Fast food companies have used a combination of strategies to shift dietary norms, especially by targeting children, with advertising, toys, playgrounds at their restaurants and cartoon 'spokescharacters'. Alone, McDonalds spends over US\$1.2 billion in advertising each year.

But that is not to say reorienting cultures on consumerism starts and ends with business interests. The media play a powerful role as well, now exposing audiences during one third to one half of their waking days to myths of consumer cultures. During those hours, much of media output reinforces consumer norms and promotes materialistic aspirations, whether directly by extolling the high-consumption lives of celebrities and the wealthy or more subtly through stories that reinforce the belief that happiness comes from being better off financially, from buying the newest consumer gadget or fashion accessory, and so on.

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<sup>3</sup> Lizabeth Cohen (2003), *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

Governments reinforce consumerism through subsidies and policies that stimulate growth of consumption, and educational systems also reinforce consumer norms both by allowing businesses to shape some of their curricula and by failing to teach children about the darker side of high consumption lifestyles. A lack of nutritional education –and a lack of modelling proper nutrition in the lunchroom–, a lack of media literacy programmes and a lack of basic ecological awareness, namely humanity's dependence on a stable Earth system for its survival, are major educational deficiencies that help to maintain the consumerist cultural paradigm.

Not surprisingly, as cultural norms have increasingly oriented on consumerism, participants in these cultures have become active players in driving, perpetuating and spreading consumerist patterns. But while it has become normalised, that does not mean it is realistic in the long term. Because we live on a finite planet, defining our success and happiness through how much we consume is not a viable option. Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence that high levels of consumption do not effectively increase human well-being. For example, materialistic values have been shown to lower satisfaction; the side effects of high consumption lifestyles (eg, obesity) increase illness, the inequitable distribution of resources reduces societal health and after a point wealth plays a shrinking role in its contributions to subjective well-being.

So, considering that consumerism is not effective at providing human well-being and is very effective at undermining planetary well-being, it makes sense to intentionally shift to a cultural paradigm where the norms, symbols, values and traditions encourage just enough consumption to satisfy human well-being while directing more human energy towards practices that help to restore planetary well-being. That way the vast majority of humanity could live high-quality lives (unlike today where one billion people are undernourished) and do so in a way that would allow our –and countless other– species to thrive long into the future.

### *Cultivating Cultures of Sustainability*

In an analysis on places to intervene in a system, the environmental scientist and systems analyst Donella Meadows explained that the most effective leverage point for changing a system is to change its paradigm –that is to say, the shared ideas or basic assumptions around which it functions–. In the case of the consumerism paradigm, the basic assumptions that need to change include: that more goods and services make people happier, that perpetual growth is good, that humans are separate from nature and that nature is a stock of resources to be exploited for human purposes.

Reorienting cultures on sustainability will demand the weakening of this consumerism paradigm and the strengthening of a sustainability paradigm, one where people find meaning and contentment not through their consumption patterns, but in living simply, restoratively and justly.

Ecological restoration would be a key assumption in this new paradigm. It should become as 'natural' to find value and meaning in life through how much a person helps restore the planet as a person today finds value and meaning in how much he earns, how large his or her home and television are, or how many gadgets or shoes he or she has.

Equity would also be a strong idea, as it is the richest who have some of the largest ecological impact. For example, in one analysis, an American household (of one person)

earning between US\$100,000-120,000 would produce 53 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>, while a one-person household earning US\$20,000-30,000 would produce just 29 tons.<sup>4</sup>

Also, the very poorest often by necessity are forced into unsustainable behaviour, like deforestation in their search for fuel. Thus, a more equitable distribution of resources within society could help to curb some of the worst ecological impacts. Recent research also shows that societies that are more equitable have less violence, better health, higher literacy levels, lower incarceration rates, less obesity and lower levels of teen pregnancy – all substantial bonus dividends that would come with cultivating this idea.<sup>5</sup>

More concretely, the role of consumption and the acceptability of different types of consumption could be altered culturally as well: consumption that actively undermines human welfare could be actively discouraged; material-intensive private consumption of goods could be replaced with public consumption, the consumption of services, or even minimal or no consumption when possible; and the goods that do remain necessary could be designed to last a long time and be ‘cradle to cradle’ –that is, products that would eliminate waste and be completely recyclable at the end of their useful lives.<sup>6</sup>

Having a vision of what values, norms and behaviours should be seen as natural will be essential in guiding the reorientation of cultures toward sustainability. Of course, this cultural transformation will not be easy. Shifting cultural systems is a long process measured in decades, not years. Even consumerism, with sophisticated technological advances and many devoted resources, took two centuries to become dominant. But as the spread of consumerism also demonstrates, leading cultural institutions can be harnessed by specific actors and can play a central role in redirecting cultural norms.

The good news is that already significant efforts are being undertaken to reorient societies’ cultural norms by harnessing six powerful institutions: education, business, government and the media, which have played such powerful roles in driving consumerism, plus social movements and sustainable traditions, both old and new.

In the realm of education, there are early signs that every aspect is being transformed – from pre-school to university, from museums to school lunch menus–. Reformers from Scotland to Italy are shifting school menus, and more food is coming from organic, local and fair-trade sources. Today, in Rome –a leader in this effort– 68% of food served in schools is organic, 26% is local and 14 % is fair-trade. More schools are integrating media literacy training, communities are building toy libraries to better share toys and reduce total commercialisation of childhood and even the very commute to and from school is being re-worked to reduce its ecological impact while modelling sustainable living to children, as ‘walking buses’ in Italy, New Zealand and elsewhere demonstrate.

The basic role of business is also starting to be re-addressed. Social enterprises are challenging the assumption that profit is the primary or even sole purpose of business. More businesses –from the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh to a restaurant chain in Thailand called Cabbages and Condoms– are putting their social mission front and

<sup>4</sup> Chris Jones (2009), ‘Consumption-based Carbon Footprint Accounting Tools’, presentation at West Coast Climate Forum, 3/XII/2009.

<sup>5</sup> R. Wilkinson & K. Pickett (2009), *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, Bloomsbury, New York.

<sup>6</sup> For a useful introduction to the concept of ‘cradle to cradle’ design, see W. McDonough & M. Braungart (2002), *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, North Point Press, New York.



centre, helping people while being financially successful as well. New corporate charters – like the B Corporation (the B stands for Benefit)– are even being designed to ensure that businesses over time are legally bound to put the well-being of Earth, workers, customers and other stakeholders at the centre of their business decisions.

In governments around the world, some innovative shifts are taking place. A long-standing government role known as ‘choice editing’, in which governments encourage good choices while discouraging bad ones, is being harnessed to reinforce sustainable choices –everything from questioning perverse subsidies and taxing unsustainable behaviours to outright bans of unsustainable technologies like the incandescent light bulb–. And more than that, entire ideas are being reassessed, from security to law. New concepts like Earth jurisprudence, in which the Earth community has fundamental rights that human laws must incorporate, are starting to take hold of the public imagination. In September 2008, Ecuador even incorporated this into its new constitution, declaring that ‘Nature or Mother Earth, where life is reproduced and exists, has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structures, functions and its evolutionary processes’ and that ‘every person, community, and nation will be able to demand the recognition of nature’s rights before public institutions’.

Films, the arts, music and other forms of media are all starting to draw more attention to sustainability. Even a segment of the marketing community is mobilising to use the knowledge of the industry to persuade people to live sustainably. These ‘social marketers’ are creating ads, videos for the Internet and campaigns to drive awareness about issues as diverse as the dangers of smoking, the importance of family planning and the problems associated with factory farming. While having only a tiny fraction of the resources as traditional marketers, with the help of social media, these marketers are having dramatic effects. One example of a successful social marketing campaign was *The Meatrix*, which, spoofing the global blockbuster movie *The Matrix*, described the adventures of a group of farm animals as they rebel against factory farms and the ecological and social ills these operations cause. This generally unpalatable message, treated in a humorous way, spread virally across the Internet, reaching an estimated 20 million viewers to date while costing only US\$50,000, a tiny fraction of what a 30-second TV ad would have cost to reach an audience of the same size.

A host of social movements are starting to form that directly or indirectly tackle issues of sustainability. Hundreds of thousands of organisations are working, often quietly on their own and unknown to each other, on the many essential aspects of building sustainable cultures. Together these have the power to redirect the momentum of consumerism and provide an appealing vision of a sustainable future. Efforts to promote working less and living more simply, the ‘slow food’ movement, the ‘degrowth’ movement, transition towns and ecovillages are all inspiring and empowering people to redirect both their own lives and broader society toward sustainability.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, cultural traditions are starting to be reoriented on sustainability. New eco-friendly ways to celebrate rituals are being established, for instance –and are becoming socially acceptable–. Family planning norms are starting to shift. Lost traditions like the wise guidance of elders are being re-discovered and used to support the shift to sustainability. And religious organisations are starting to use their mighty influence to tackle

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<sup>7</sup> These movements, and many others, are described in *State of the World 2010*.

environmental issues –printing green bibles, encouraging their congregations to conserve energy, investing institutional funds responsibly and taking a stance against abuses of Creation, such as razing forests and blowing up mountain tops for coal–.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, all of these efforts together may not be enough considering that consumerism is so strongly set in, that the majority of resources and wealth are still overwhelmingly being used to stimulate this pattern and that few are even aware of the need to shift paradigms and will resist this shift if brought on. But regardless of resistance, as the scientist James Lovelock notes, ‘Civilization in its present form hasn’t got long’. Consumerism –due to its ecological impossibility– cannot continue much longer. The more seeds sown by the many pioneers of a sustainability culture now, the higher the probability that the political, social and cultural vacuum created by the decline of consumerism will be filled with ideas of sustainability as opposed to other less humanistic ideologies.

And, then again, maybe the current economic and ecological disruptions will lead to enough innovative ‘cultural pioneers’ to start pushing dominant institutions to reorient on sustainability instead of consumerism, triggering a dramatic cultural shift. The anthropologist Margaret Mead is often quoted as saying: ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has’. With many interconnected innovators energised, organised and committed to spreading a sustainable way of life, a new cultural paradigm could take hold –one that will allow humanity to live better lives today and long into the future–.

**Conclusion:** Ultimately, whether due to smashing against Earth’s limits or intentional transformation, our social, economic and cultural systems will have to evolve so that they are once again designed to exist within the boundaries of nature. This will necessarily take a pro-active and intentional set of efforts by millions of cultural pioneers spread across all societal institutions –education, government, business, the media, traditions and social movements– to shift their cultures so that living sustainably becomes as natural as living as a consumer feels today.

Fortunately, there are already many cultural pioneers starting to drive this shift: at the very local level, teachers change their classroom lessons, gardens and school lunch programmes, while at the very highest levels, where entrepreneurs are building new types of businesses, government officials are legislating with Earth in mind and storytellers are inspiring young generations with new myths that redefine our relationship with Earth. None of these efforts alone will be enough to derail the consumer culture’s rapid spread, but together, we may bring about a culture designed to last millennia, healing Earth and curing the ill-being of humanity brought about by a consumer culture that celebrates excess rather than enough.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Santiago García Acuña (2010), ‘La Conferencia de Copenhague sobre el Clima y la Declaración Interreligiosa sobre el Cambio Climático: un acercamiento a la aportación de las religiones a la crisis atmosférica’, Working Paper 18/2010, Elcano Royal Institute, 14/VI/2010.